

Combining work with play—experiences of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Student Trainee

by Heather Knudsen

Two years ago at the University of Montana, my advisor approached me and suggested I apply for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service SCEP program. And what is the SCEP program? I asked. After doing some research, I discovered that SCEP stands for Student Career Experience Program and that it was designed to help the Service bring in motivated, talented students with a background in biological sciences. Each summer SCEP students get placed in different refuges to gain a variety of experiences, and upon graduation the students are placed permanently within their assigned Region. (Alaska is Region 7.) Wow, I thought, this sounds pretty good! Pretty good was an understatement; being a SCEP student has been an amazing experience.

I applied to the program as a first-semester freshman, but I was not accepted on the basis that I had not yet proven my dedication to wildlife biology. Instead of offering me a permanent SCEP position, I was given a temporary biological technician position with Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. This position proved ideal at the time because I worked on seven different projects within three months. Lending a hand wherever it was needed and hopping around from project to project afforded me insight on various field operations. Working with waterfowl, wood frogs, aquatic vegetation, and Alaskan native youth, I learned not only about scientific techniques, but also about cross-cultural communication and cooperation. I had a great foundation from which to work after my first summer with the Service.

Persisting in my goal of becoming a SCEP student, I re-applied in my sophomore year and accepted. My first placement brought me to Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, based out of Dillingham. Unlike my summer at Yukon Flats, I worked on just two projects, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. This allowed me to delve into and truly understand each project.

The first month I counted sea bird colonies at Cape Pierce, one of the most incredible natural areas I've ever seen. This project has monitored the sea bird populations for many years. I counted common murrelets,

black-legged kittiwakes, and pelagic cormorants. Each of the other two technicians on the Cape had a project of their own. One of them surveyed nest success of common murrelets and black-legged kittiwakes, and the other counted the walrus and seal populations.

Originally I thought I would be living in a tent, as I had at my other field camps. But I wasn't too disappointed when I learned that I would have a small cabin all to myself. The other two biological technicians lived in the larger cabin next door. We were the only residents on the entire Cape—human residents, that is. Each day on my hiking route to count birds on the cliffs, without fail I would see grizzly bears with cubs, red foxes with kits, caribou, hoary marmots, walrus, and puffins. Not to mention the beautiful views of Cape Newenham and numerous other species. It was a wildlife paradise, and I loved every minute of it.

Next I flew to the Kanektok River where I worked on an escapement weir and tagged Dolly Varden. This is a joint project between Alaska Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Native village of Quinhagak, which occurs annually to monitor the fish populations. Two years ago the Dolly Varden project undertook to learn more about the Dolly life cycle. Each of the three rivers on the Togiak Refuge (Good News, Togiak and Kanektok Rivers) use a different color tag on the Dollies to see if they return to their respective natal streams.

Just like Cape Pierce, the Kanektok River was spectacular. We had thousands of fish passing through the weir everyday while I was there. Unlike most rivers, the Kanektok is home to all five species of Pacific salmon, making it a world class fishing river. If you prefer trout fishing, the Kanektok can fulfill that desire as well. There are plenty of beautiful rainbow trout, not to mention Dolly Varden, whitefish and grayling. This river blew me away with the amount of life it could sustain. The river itself is not very large, nor is it deep, and it is crystal clear. Because of this, almost everywhere I looked I could see schools of fish. I fell so in love with the project and the river that I have to return, so I am spending my last two weeks in Alaska

this year volunteering for the Kanektok River weir.

Currently I am working with Law Enforcement on the Kenai Refuge. How did I change from wildlife biology to law enforcement? Well, at the SCEP orientation meeting my first summer, Jill Birchell, a special agent based in Anchorage, gave a talk about the law enforcement aspect of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I found myself intrigued by her presentation and wanted to know more. I asked to job shadow her for a couple of days that summer, and she agreed. Jill introduced me to a new realm for applying my wildlife biology background, and I found it fascinating. After two summers of biological technician work, I decided it was time to branch out and see if law enforcement really was for me.

Now that I've gotten a taste of Refuge Officer work, I can definitively say that I would like to pursue a career in law enforcement. There is always something to look forward to, and we do something new and exciting nearly every day. During the peaks of the fishing season, we spend most of our time on the Kenai and Russian Rivers looking for fishing viola-

tions. Some of you may have seen me walking along the river banks or pretending to fish at Moose Range Meadows. Other days we patrol the refuge by truck, foot or canoe. We spend the majority of our time outdoors, which is exactly where I want to be. Rain or shine, this job definitely beats sitting behind a desk eight hours a day.

In a few short weeks I will return to Missoula for my last year of undergraduate studies. When I graduate in the spring of 2005, I could be placed at any of the 16 refuges in Alaska, according to positions available. Whether wildlife biology work or law enforcement, my next placement will be a more permanent position. Each refuge has something unique and special to offer, so I look forward to wherever my placement brings me.

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